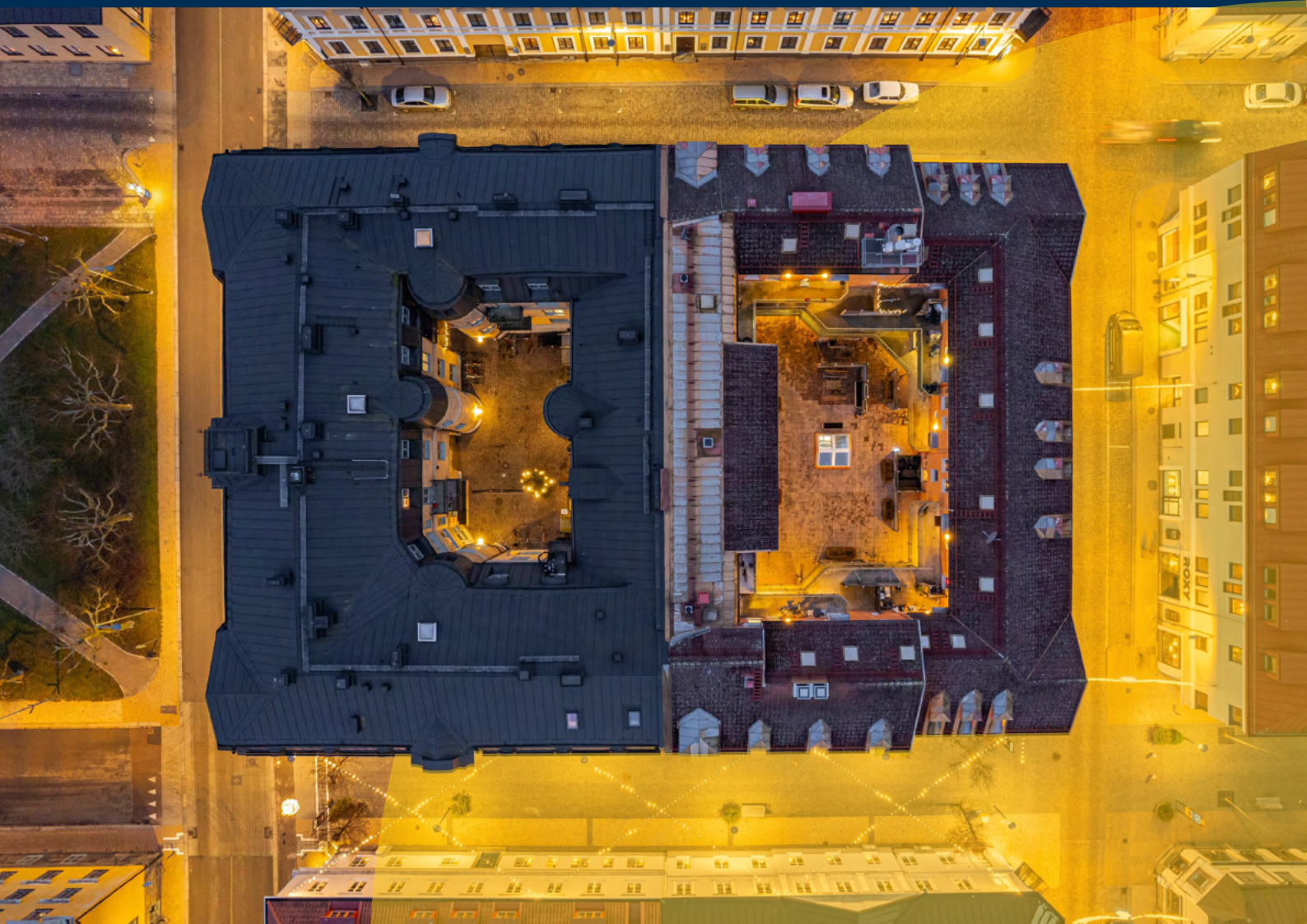
Rethinking engagement to accelerate heat networks

Insights from industry leaders

February 2026



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Foreword

It's always difficult to convince people that making a disruptive change in their lives is the right thing to do. This is especially true when that change runs counter to decades of established practice and requires people to imagine an entirely new way of living.

This, in essence, is the challenge facing those seeking to scale UK district heating, or heat networks.

Meeting government targets will require a wholesale transformation of national heating infrastructure, supported by a new customer base that is, while also willing to say goodbye to their gas boilers and connect to a network.

Communicating this transformation will require careful messaging, grounded in a clear understanding of both the industry and its customers.

At Copper, we specialise in generating the insights needed to engage audiences with the energy transition.

Our original research has consistently shown that the public is more open to change than is often assumed. While there may be points of contention, most people recognise the need to modernise to keep pace with changing times and are willing to support that change when its relevance and benefits are clearly articulated.

To help define what this looks like for heat networks, we have spoken to experts from industry and academia to capture their perspectives on customer needs and expectations over the coming year, and on how best to communicate with customers to meet these.

We are committed to using our findings to support and strengthen the sector's engagement with customers. We hope they will be valuable to all those delivering heat networks and associated projects.

The next year will be crucial for the future of UK heat networks. If we rethink our approach to engagement, to make a compelling case for their necessity and benefits, we can drive new connections that see the industry thrive.

Alex Fyans
Heat Network Lead

Executive summary

Bracing for change

2026 is set to be a year of change for heat networks and in how customers view connection.

New Ofgem requirements will fundamentally change how heat networks are operated and perceived. These reforms are a positive sign of an industry maturing, but also raise expectations around transparency and accountability.

Additionally, media coverage is raising more frequent and more pointed questions around issues such as pricing and reliability. This scrutiny is compounded by increasing misinformation on social media that portrays heat networks as unreliable, unaccountable and unable to meet the UK's heating demand.

Building a new narrative

Together, these forces mean that the current message to customers is no longer sufficient.

In short, going green can't be the only reason to connect. Pragmatic, customer-focused messaging that tackles issues head-on is needed.

Developers and operators need to rethink communications in 2026 if we are going to build consumer confidence and drive sufficient interest in connections to enable expansion and hit targets.

The most effective way to do this is for the sector to rally around a set of shared messages that collectively reinforce the benefits of heat networks and their role in the future of UK heating.

Sharing industry insight

At Copper, we specialise in translating industry knowledge into winning communications strategies.

We ended 2025 by canvassing leading experts from across industry and academia, and asking what they thought the key message to prospective heat network customers should be in 2026.

The following insights synthesise their responses and provide an evidence-led framework to help the sector navigate upcoming changes and support confident engagement with customers.

New messages for customers

1. Heat networks simply work

The most common advice we received from our experts was to simply reassure customers that heat networks work.

The average person has limited time to take in nuanced messaging about the logistics and benefits of connecting. They're likely to only read the headline, and if this doesn't assure them that connecting will provide a reliable service with minimal effort, they won't be motivated to take things further.

Heat network communications in 2026 should therefore be frontloaded with the message that, once connected, heat networks will provide customers with dependable, hassle-free heating.

"At first engagement, people are usually irked because they don't understand what heat networks are and how they work. It's about providing reassurance that the system works, and that they can have a hot shower whenever they want to."

"The average resident isn't excited about how heat reaches their home. If people are talking about heat networks, then it's probably a sign we're doing something wrong. We want to get to a place where people understand that [once they're connected] it just happens."

New messages for customers

2. Heat networks are tried and tested

"Show, don't tell" is an old adage, but one that is too rarely observed in heat network communications.

Our experts noted that customers often struggle to engage with heat networks because the benefits feel abstract. Without lived experience or trusted personal endorsements, prospective customers are left to rely on the assurances of business development leads who they might distrust and perceive as simply trying to sell them a service.

This distrust can be amplified, too, by government mandates that cause customers to question why they are not being given a choice about the way their building is heated.

The onus is on the industry to deliver messaging that demonstrates that heat networks not only work, but are already delivering for customers the world over by providing reliable, efficient heat at city scale.

"Heat networks are a proven technology. There are many examples that we can point to of heat networks delivering for customers at a fair price. Once people learn that heat networks are already providing reliable heat in Europe and right here in the UK, they'll be more receptive to connecting."

Case studies are an effective way to demonstrate proven heat network success. Directing prospective customers to well-known examples within the industry, such as the Copenhagen heat network which supplies heat to more than 98% of the city's buildings, shows that heat networks can work at scale. When combined with UK and hyper-local case studies and testimonials, including those available through industry associations such as the UK Heat Networks Industry Council, these can go a long way towards reassuring customers that heat networks can be relied on.

New messages for customers

3. It's not all about the carbon

Once prospective customers are convinced that heat networks are a viable option, they will naturally want to know what's in it for them.

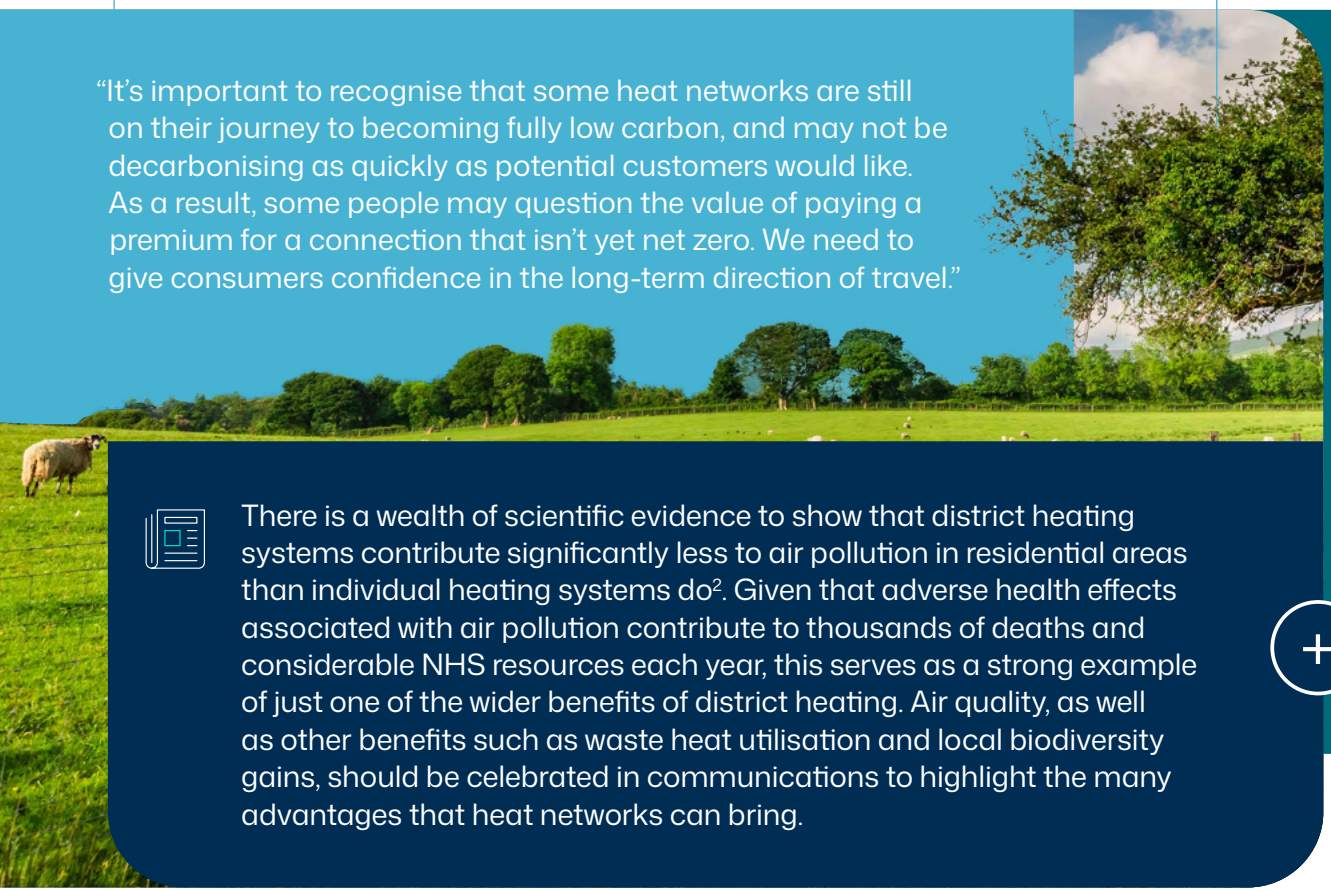
Climate change is commonly cited as the principal driver of heat network expansion, but it isn't always the issue that resonates most with customers. Our research shows that one in four people do not believe climate change will pose a threat to them or the UK in the next five years, despite increasing instances of extreme weather and climate emergency declarations[1].

This aligns with advice we received from the experts we canvassed that customer communications which rely too heavily on concerns about carbon reduction are likely to seem vague and unmotivating.

Heat network communications should highlight the tangible difference that heat networks can make to people's lives. For example, one unsung benefit of heat networks is their potential to improve air quality and, as a result, reduce the burden on local health services.

"An unsung benefit of heat networks and taking out hundreds or even thousands of individual sources of combustion is that you massively improve air quality. Around 40,000 excess deaths a year in the UK are attributed to poor air quality and it costs about £27 million annually in costs to the NHS. We need to measure, record and shout about this."

"It's important to recognise that some heat networks are still on their journey to becoming fully low carbon, and may not be decarbonising as quickly as potential customers would like. As a result, some people may question the value of paying a premium for a connection that isn't yet net zero. We need to give consumers confidence in the long-term direction of travel."



There is a wealth of scientific evidence to show that district heating systems contribute significantly less to air pollution in residential areas than individual heating systems do[2]. Given that adverse health effects associated with air pollution contribute to thousands of deaths and considerable NHS resources each year, this serves as a strong example of just one of the wider benefits of district heating. Air quality, as well as other benefits such as waste heat utilisation and local biodiversity gains, should be celebrated in communications to highlight the many advantages that heat networks can bring.

[1] Winning back the net zero narrative https://copperconsultancy.com/news/winning-back-the-net-zero-narrative/

[2] Winning back the net zero narrative https://copperconsultancy.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/copper-consultancy-winning-back-the-net-zero-narrative-report.pdf

New messages for customers

4. Heat networks come with robust protections

Increased regulation presents operational challenges but can also present communications opportunities.

Prospective customers are unlikely to know about the shifting regulatory landscape, but a quick online search will reveal to them that heat networks are undergoing significant change. This might not be presented positively and could lead to perceptions that the industry is unstable and untrustworthy.

As the sector grapples to keep pace with regulation, it must work to challenge the narrative that it is struggling to get its house in order.

Our experts suggested that regulation should be presented positively as a benefit, rather than avoided. There is no need to go into unnecessary detail, but reassuring customers upfront that connection comes with the same consumer protections as traditional gas heating will help establish heat networks as a legitimate industry they can trust.

Heat network communications should clearly explain that new regulations are tightening how heat networks operate, and reassure customers that these changes are designed to work in their interests.

"Upcoming consumer regulations are good for customers and the sector's reputation as a whole. [They mean] the industry can continue delivering [low-carbon solutions] while also ensuring the rights of the end user are always a priority."

New messages for customers

5. There's huge potential to generate local value

Hard-won trust can be lost quickly if heat network construction disrupts daily life and negatively impacts perceptions of the industry.

Our experts highlighted the critical role that construction plays in influencing customers, and the need to develop messaging that pre-empts and reframes construction-related concerns.

Previous Copper research points to a clear approach[3]. We have found that while most people understand the need for more resilient infrastructure, they want to see tangible benefits from it in their communities, such as jobs, skills and social value generation. Heat network construction offers an ideal opportunity to deliver these benefits and, in doing so, build advocacy and interest in connections.

Messaging should therefore highlight the value that heat network construction creates locally, positioning construction works as part of the local industrial fabric and a source of high-skilled jobs for local people.

"We need to destigmatise heat network construction. Decarbonising UK cities won't happen if we don't change our approach to heating buildings, so the more communities and customers can see, hear and understand the drive behind it, the better."

[3] Building consent for renewables https://copperconsultancy.com/campaigns-and-initiatives/building-consent-for-renewables/

New messages for customers

6. Every connection is different local value

A sure way to lose potential customers is to come on too strong and oversell your services.

This was a clear message from our experts, who recommended that heat network communications should encourage customers to make up their own minds about connecting.

They noted that prospective customers are often sceptical because of a general perception that connecting to a heat network is simply not yet the norm. To challenge this perception, communications should direct customers to advice that can answer specific questions and help individuals understand the benefits of connecting in ways that are relevant to them.

In short, heat network communications should empower prospective customers to take ownership of their decisions and learn how their individual needs can be met by connecting.

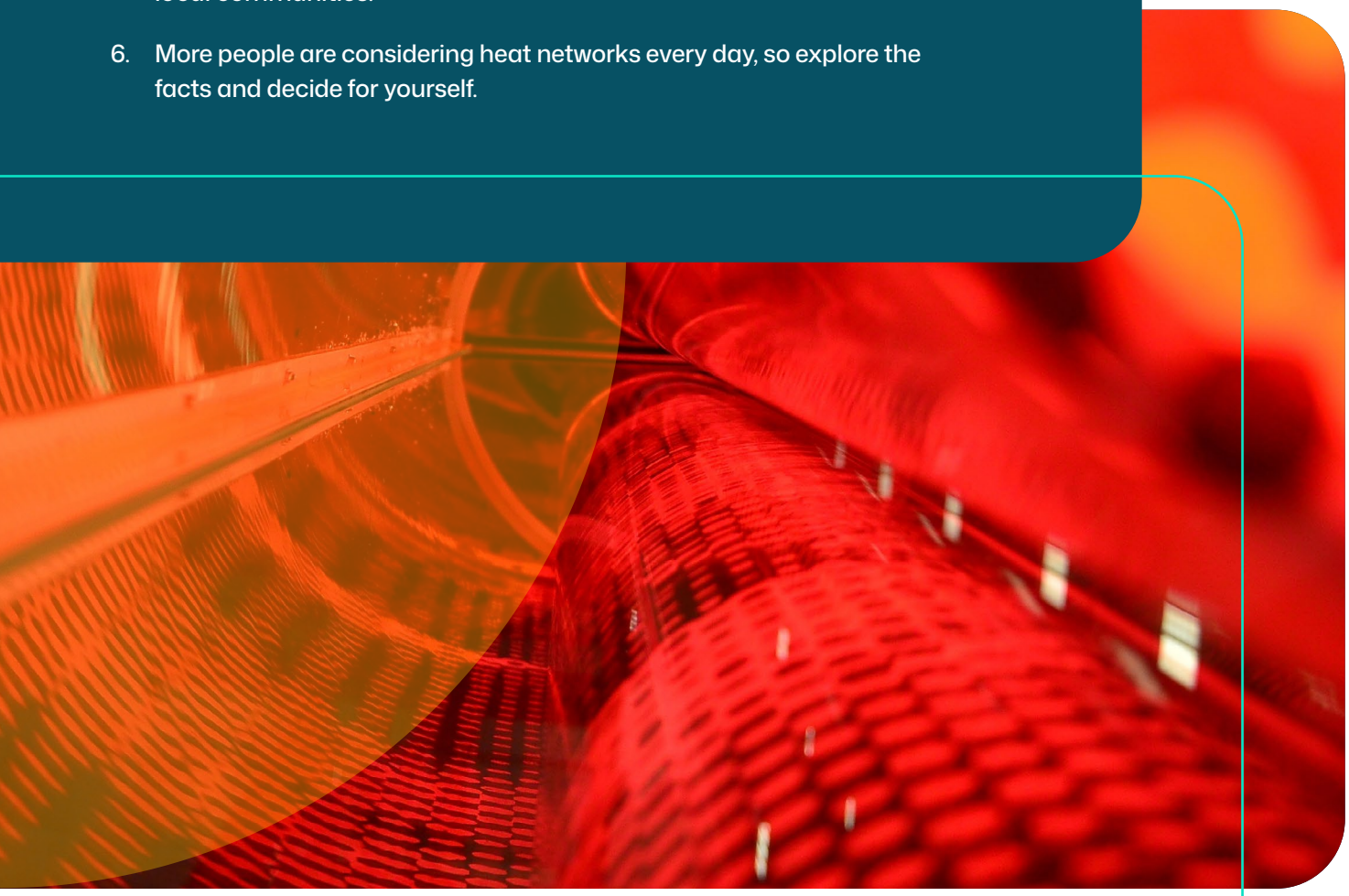
"You can't assume that everyone is resistant for the same reason. For some people it might be cost, for others it's a lack of trust, and some people might have heard from neighbours who have had bad experiences."

"There is already quite a lot in the public domain and it's important that those impacted can access information they need to inform their decisions."

Conclusions

We have distilled the following key messages from our experts' input and our own experience and expertise. Heat network communications should aim to convey this messaging to earn customer confidence and win advocacy for expansion.

1. Heat networks are a dependable, hassle-free way to get heating whenever you need it.
2. They're a tried and tested technology that is already providing low-cost heating to entire cities.
3. Heat networks come with a range of benefits including cleaner air for local communities.
4. New regulations provide robust protections, ensuring customers are never caught out.
5. Heat network construction delivers skilled jobs and lasting value for local communities.
6. More people are considering heat networks every day, so explore the facts and decide for yourself.



For more information

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